

Genre: A very brief introduction

ENG 106, Fall 2015

You've probably heard of genre in connection with music: hip-hop, country, rhythm and blues, and many more. Or perhaps movies: sci-fi thrillers such as *Gravity*, documentaries, or campy thrillers like *Sharknado!* Knowing what genre you're listening or watching, or knowing common features associated with that genre, shapes your expectations. For example, it would be odd, to say the least, for any film you see in a movie theater to have a laugh track—but that's normal for a sitcom on television. Knowing George Clooney or Tara Reid is in a movie says something about it. Something good? That depends on the viewers, and what they are looking for.

Sharknado! doesn't fit the Oscar-winning definition of "good" — but you can certainly watch it with friends and laugh. So a specific kind of "good" is tied to a specific activity.

You can probably think of many ways that genre shapes both films and music: the design of movie posters; the visual style musicians choose for publicity photos or album covers; the previews which show before a film; the length of both films and music. The list goes on, for sure. The concrete elements which are easily identified in a specific genre are called *genre features*. For example, a text which has a corporate logo at the top and begins with the date "Dear Valued Customer..." is a letter from a company, perhaps bearing bad news. Can you identify the genre features of the texts mentioned above and other texts we use in this class, such as textbooks and assignments?

Genres are by no means fixed and inflexible. This applies in several ways.

1. **Genres vary between contexts and individuals.** "Hip-hop" or "grunge" may mean something very different to you than someone you meet from southern California. You've probably experienced this as you write for different subjects: a research paper for history isn't the same as one for English, though it shares many common features—and these smaller differences can be very hard to understand!
2. **Genres change over time,** in response to changes in technologies, their roles in culture, and other forces. In 1990, grunge was still cutting edge, relatively hard to find, and not at all mainstream. Twenty years later, it's all over the place. We could say the same about many genres and the situations they are engaged in over time.
3. **Genres are social.** This is the key difference between traditional understandings of genre and current thinking. Genres are created by groups of humans, and in turn shape the social interactions of those humans and the larger systems they are in—families, workplaces, cultures, countries. They reflect the socially established norms and truths of these groups.

Writing works the same way. Genres shape the way we read, react to, prepare to write, draft, re-write, and share texts in very profound ways. Writing which is perfect for a certain situation can be completely inappropriate for another. For example, could you imagine trying to use the "Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion" approach common to scientific articles to write a short story? Or making a PowerPoint presentation to ask your parents to help you pay for a Spring Break trip? It's easy to see the mismatches there. But many writers fail to see similar, smaller mismatches: word choices which are questionable, or reliance on sources which are not usual for a given field, or an unusual visual design.

Writing researchers like to say that genres are *typified rhetorical ways of interacting within recurring situations*. Let's unpack each of those:

- **Typified:** genres are developed over time, through practice, and represent the consensus of groups of writers with shared interests and/or goals. They are never arbitrary, but designed for specific purposes, shaped with those purposes in mind, and also shape the situations they are involved with.
- **Rhetorical:** genres are built for persuasion—influencing the ways others think, and/or shaping their actions. This persuasiveness can take many forms, and it can be implicit or very direct (recall the definitions of rhetoric we read earlier this semester).
- **Interacting:** genres arise from social action, and shape it too. Writers often collaborate with others, and genres often work in concert with other genres (for example, a résumé is often accompanied by a cover letter). Researchers speak of genre sets, the collections of genres individuals produce, and genre systems, the interactions of multiple genre sets.
- **Recurring situations:** genres are tied to specific contexts many people face again and again. Genres help people respond to those situations, often in a manner which changes both the situations and the people within them.

Here's a quick example based on a genre you should be familiar with: the course syllabus.

Characteristic	Examples
Genre features	Begins with instructor information. Includes explanation of value of course, lists of required texts, lists of major assignments, policies, and a schedule. Uses bulleted lists and tables extensively. Almost always includes language and/or links (“boilerplate”) required by university or college.
Typified	Instructors often copy and paste language from past syllabi, both their own and those created by others. Instructors are likely to use similar language.
Rhetorical	Persuades students to follow policies, take certain actions, and engage certain texts in the manners described. Projects particular goals for courses which students are encouraged to share and/or required to respond to.
Interacting	Engages assignments and activities; course texts, particularly those which prescribe activity such as a lab manual; content from other courses; policies which may be on external web sites.
Recurring situations	Students are expected to read and engage as in previous and following courses and academic situations. Repeated meetings scheduled at the same time. Connected structure is same for many other courses (16 weeks, 150 contact minutes every week, few if any meetings on weekends, etc).
Genre set (for instructor)	Syllabus, assignments, textbooks, scholarly articles and other readings, slide decks for in-class presentations, Blackboard site, examinations, etc.
Genre system	Instructors, students, and administrators all produce multiple texts which interact with syllabi directly or indirectly (e.g. for students, completed assignments and lecture notes; for administrators, policies and curricula).